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PROFESSOR HOXIE'S INTERPRETATION OF TRADE UNIONISM

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A series of articles now current in the *Journal of Political Economy*¹ appears destined to mark a fresh departure in the study of the American labor movement. Hitherto we have had a plentiful deal of description with a painful lack of interpretation. The well-known *Johns Hopkins Studies*, as also a multitude of monographs after the same model, give a mass of valuable information as to the history, structure, and policies of particular unions and union groups, but they hardly attempt a causal or genetic account of the phenomena with which they deal. Still less is theory, in the sense of reasoned explanation, to be looked for in the various textbooks or in the mass of popular and propagandist literature devoted to labor subjects. The monumental *Documentary History*, edited by Professor Commons, professes to be no more than a source book, and the forthcoming *opus magnum*, to be based on the same rich collection of materials, has not yet been given to the world. Professor Commons, indeed, has sought to interpret as well as describe. His scattered articles,² as well as the masterly "introductions" to the several volumes of the *Documentary History*, are packed with helpful clues and brilliant suggestions, but he has nowhere brought together, as have the Webbs, a coherent body of trade-union theory. Professor Hoxie's is, therefore, the first attempt at a systematic interpretation of unionism in the United States.

Were it no more than this—the putting-together in coherent form of the disjointed fragments of union theory already extant—Professor Hoxie would have made a substantial contribution to the

¹ R. F. Hoxie, "Trade Unionism in the United States," *Journal of Political Economy*, XXII, 201 (March, 1914), and 464 (May, 1914).

² Many of these have been collected in the volume entitled *Labor and Administration*.

economics of labor. But these articles are no mere redaction. They approach the subject from a novel standpoint and they give a fresh interpretation.

Trade unions hitherto have been analyzed and distinguished mainly in terms of structure.¹ We have been told much of craft unionism and industrial unionism, of local, national, and district units, whereas we have heard comparatively little of those differences in the trade-union world which lie deeper than forms of organization. Spiritually, unionism is looked upon, by lay and learned alike, as a single whole. Diversity of method has, indeed, been recognized, as well as something in the way of cumulative change, but neither development nor variation is held to vitiate the substantial unity of the movement. Friend and foe, economist, preacher, and propagandist, assume to pass judgment upon unionism *per se*. The judgments, to be sure, are as diverse as the standpoints from which they are made, but rarely is there any hint that the thing judged is of a non-unitary character. Even the Webbs can speak of the "assumptions," "implications," and "economic characteristics" of trade-union policy as if they had to do with one consistent social philosophy.²

This view of the union movement as essentially one in purpose and outlook has supported, and been supported by, a narrowly economic explanation of unionism. The growth and mutations of union structure and polity are accounted for, typically and in the main, by the development of industrial technique and the progressive widening of the market.³ Social and political conditions are admitted as modifying influences, but even Professor Commons, who has gone farthest in this direction, has thus far made little use of such forces in working out the details of his problem. Still

¹ The famous definition of a trade union as "a *continuous organization* [writer's italics] of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving their conditions of employment" (Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, chap. i) illustrates and emphasizes the structural viewpoint.

² Webb, *Industrial Democracy*, Part II, chaps. xii and xiii; Part III, chap. iii.

³ Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise*, pp. 221-336; Commons, "The American Shoemakers" in *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XXIV, 39-84; Ethelbert Stewart, "A Documentary History of the Early Organizations of Printers," *Bulletin of the U.S. Bureau of Labor*, No. 61.

less has any adequate attention been given to subjective factors. Stress is laid upon the environment which shapes the union, to the relative neglect of the human materials out of which the union is formed. The social creeds which unions impose upon their members have been duly set forth; the beliefs, ideals, and aspirations which members bring to their unions have hardly been remarked.

It is just these neglected functional and psychological aspects of unionism which Professor Hoxie has brought to the focus of attention. To him a union is not so much an outward organization as a like-minded group. The effectual bond which unites a body of wage-workers is not a constitution and by-laws, a set of officers and a treasury, but a consciousness of common needs and aims, a common outlook on life, and a common program for the betterment of their lot. To employ Professor Hoxie's terminology, the essence of unionism is a social philosophy—an interpretation of the social facts and relationships which impinge upon the group in question, and a solution of the practical problems which these present. The interpretation may be wide or narrow, explicitly formulated or implicit and ill defined; the program may concern itself solely with conditions of employment or it may embrace the economic and political regeneration of society. But some social philosophy, more or less consistent and far-reaching, and some generally accepted scheme of policies and methods, are the *sine qua non* of common action. The unionism which excites hopes and fears is functional; structure is altogether a secondary and derivative matter.

Analyzed from this functional standpoint trade unionism appears to be not one, but many. Professor Hoxie finds five distinct functional types (not to mention subvariants) which differ among themselves in aims, methods, and attitude toward existing institutions. *Business unionism*, accepting the wages system as it is, seeks the best obtainable terms of employment for its own membership. Its method is collective bargaining supplemented by mutual insurance and occasional resort to strikes; its outlook is that of the craft or trade, its aims somewhat narrowly economic. The railway brotherhoods furnish the stock illustration, though the type is dominant in the American Federation of Labor as well. *Uplift unionism* accepts, along with the wages system, the whole

existing social order. Its mission is the diffusion of leisure-class culture and *bourgeois* virtues among the workers. Mutual insurance is its main function and homiletics its preoccupation. There is no representative of the pure type—unless the Woman's Trade Union League be accepted as such—but there is a strong infusion of uplift idealism in most unions that are dominated by the business animus. *Revolutionary unionism* avowedly aims at the overthrow of the extant socio-economic order by and for the working class. Its two variants—socialistic and quasi-anarchistic—are sufficiently represented by the Detroit and the Chicago organizations of the I.W.W.¹ *Predatory unionism* practices secret, rather than open, violence. It is lawless, and in so far anarchistic, but it professes no far-reaching philosophy, nor does it aim at anything beyond the immediate economic advantage of its own membership. When this ruthless policy is a counsel of despair, the continuation of a bitter struggle which has gone against the union and the practical answer to a policy of extermination on the part of employers, Professor Hoxie terms the resultant subspecies *guerrilla unionism*. The dynamiting career of the Structural Iron Workers is a familiar example. When, on the other hand, predation is deliberately adopted for the aggrandizement of a narrow ring, he applies the more opprobrious epithet of *hold-up unionism*. The term is not altogether happy. Cunning characterizes the type still more than force; its most brilliant successes have been gained by illicit alliance with monopoly-seeking employers. "Skinney" Madden and "Sam" Parks are the beaux ideal of the type. It is fair to add that predatory unionism, in both its forms, is more picturesque than significant. *Dependent unionism* appears in two forms: that which relies upon the support of unionists outside the group concerned and that which is created by employers for ends of their own. Some "label" unions are at least partially dependent in the former sense; all "yellow" unions, of which the organization fathered by the late C. W. Post is a conspicuous example, are wholly dependent in the latter sense.

¹ Professor Hoxie cites the Western Federation of Miners as a socialistic union. But though the official program of this union is a synopsis of the Communist Manifesto, its actual methods are more nearly of the ordinary business type.

Manifestly we have here to do with something more than variants from a single norm. These are so many distinct and conflicting social philosophies in terms of the special needs and problems of wage-workers. Each offers an interpretation of existing law and order and a plan of united action for the attainment of more tolerable conditions of life; each is held by large numbers of wage-workers who carry on an active propaganda for the conversion of their fellows, and each aspires to possess the field.¹ These functional varieties, then, are true union types, as distinct as the industrial and craft forms of organization and far more significant.

No functional type, it must be owned, is precisely represented by any concrete union, past or present; which comes to saying that no union is altogether homogeneous in respect to aims, policies, and attitude. Rival types coexist and struggle for the mastery within the same organization. As already mentioned, the American Federation of Labor is dominantly of the business type; nevertheless, a strong and active socialist minority exists in the federation itself and in most of the constituent unions. The conflict of business and revolutionary unionism is waged in the official publications, in local meetings and general conventions, and in elections and referenda. Even the ultra-revolutionary I.W.W. has been torn by internecine strife between anarchist and socialist groups.

This want of identity between functional and structural lines of cleavage has obscured the existence of the former. The organization has an outward and visible identity. It adopts constitutions and by-laws, holds conventions, enters into trade agreements, and conducts strikes; above all, it bears a proper name as the attestation of its corporeality. The like-minded group which constitutes a functional type has not these hall-marks of tangibility. It is probable that no functional type has ever been able to possess itself absolutely of any important organization or to get itself embodied without admixture in any considerable number of union programs. None the less, these types do exist and have persisted for decades. Business and uplift unionism date from the eighteenth century.

¹ This statement needs some qualification. The predatory type has shown little tendency to proselytize and the propaganda of "yellow" unionism is carried on by employers.

Revolutionary unionism has been present in the American Federation of Labor from its beginning and was present also in its predecessors. The struggle of these three types for the mastery (the other two being of minor consequence) has shaped the internal history of the labor movement. The functional character of the leading unions has shifted from period to period as one or another type has gained a position of dominance, but no major type has ever wholly disappeared or lost its distinctive character.

The emergence and the persistence of these union types cannot be explained by work-day environment alone, for radical divergencies of group viewpoint and attitude are found among the members of the same trade employed in the same establishment and such divergencies have endured for half a century even within a single craft organization—e.g., the Cigar Makers' International Union. Nor is economic circumstance, however broadly conceived, adequate to account for the phenomena. On the one hand, the most diverse types coexist under similar industrial and market conditions; on the other hand, the same types have survived the most startling economic transformations.

The social philosophy of unionism relates to the practical (mainly economic) problems which confront wage-workers as such and it turns upon conditions of work and livelihood and upon the politico-economic institutions which govern these conditions. But this philosophy is shaped by the whole mass of influences—personal and cultural—which bear upon the workers involved. For man is, after all, a single person. The several aspects of his life cannot be isolated one from another; the habits of thought which he has acquired as a citizen, a churchman, or a pleasure-seeker guide him also in his work-day pursuits. Rejecting, therefore, every attempt to give a monistic explanation, Professor Hoxie has sought to analyze the efficient causes actually observable in the evolution of unionism. These causes may be grouped under five heads.¹

1. The work-day environment proper, which operates in manifold ways to produce solidarity among the workmen of a given

¹ The analysis here given is more detailed than that contained in Professor Hoxie's second chapter but seems to the writer fully consonant therewith. See *Journal of Political Economy*, XXII, 473.

trade or industry. This is the most obvious factor in the case, the one which is best understood and which has received the most attention from students of the subject.

2. Union tradition, itself in great part the spiritual distillate of experience and consequently differing from union to union, but within each organization acting as a consolidating force.

3. The immediate social *milieu*, comprising those economic, juridical, ethical, aesthetic, religious, and other institutional standards, convictions, and relationships which make up the prevalent civilization. A large part of this cultural complex impinges with a fair degree of uniformity upon the members of the same occupational group at a given time and place, and so favors a group interpretation and program. Another part, however—e.g., aesthetic and religious influences—diversely affects workers of the same occupation, even in the same community, and so makes for the formation of subgroups. The like divergence is, of course, more pronounced as between widely separated localities within the same large cultural situation.

4. What may be loosely termed national characteristics. Workers of the same craft in the United States are gathered from many nations, and, what is more to the point, from widely different cultural situations. They bring to their work and to their unions the most diverse convictions and ideals with respect both to economic and political institutions in general, and to the immediate problems which confront them in their capacity of wage-workers. To mold these diverse elements into a homogeneous group—homogeneous as respects even the immediate problems of work and pay—is a labor of time. It is also in good part a labor of Sisyphus, in that it continually requires to be done anew for fresh comers.

5. Congenital variation of those propensities and aptitudes which form the underlying traits of human nature.¹ Such variations may be of an individual character or they may connote the presence of distinct ethnic types in our mixed population. They cover a wide range and are independent of recent cultural antecedents. Just what part is played by these differences of native endowment, as over against environment, may be a moot point,

¹ Professor Hoxie subsumes these congenital traits under the not altogether apposite term of temperament.

but few would deny to this factor a very considerable rôle in shaping the lives of men. Whatever its importance, it makes for diversity of the raw material and finished product of unionism.

From the varied combinations of these relatively permanent forces unionism receives its form and substance. "Workers similarly situated, economically and socially, closely associated and not too divergent in temperament (congenital endowment) and training, will tend to develop a common interpretation of the social situation, and a common solution of the problem of living"¹—that is, will tend to form a functional type. Obviously there will be as many such types as there are groups of workers with vitally different viewpoints and plans of action.² The functional character of any given union is, then, a question of the psychological groups of which it is composed, and this resolves itself into a question of the personal traits and cultural heritage of its members and of the environmental discipline to which they have been subjected. The differentiation of unions, whereby one comes to be dominantly business and another dominantly socialistic in animus, is doubtless a matter partly of selection and partly of progressive adaptation to environment. Men of certain characteristics, native and acquired, choose, and are chosen for, the pursuit of locomotive engineers; thereafter the influences of their daily life and work mold their habits of thought to a common pattern. The members of the I.W.W. come from a very different social stratum, of other natural endowments and other cultural antecedents, and their training as "hobos" enforces a very different outlook on life. These forces of selection and adaptation which, on the one hand, have produced the archetype of respectable laborism, and, on the other hand, have made the I.W.W. a hissing and a byword among the devotees of "law and order"—these forces are relatively permanent and they work out their cumulative effects in permanently different combinations. Hence the resultant union types have hitherto shown no tendency to merge into one common unionism.

This view of unionism, whether as interpretation or as genetic account, wants definitive verification. It must be shown that conflicting union viewpoints exist, not as mere individual differences

¹ Hoxie, *Journal of Political Economy*, XXII, 467.

² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 470.

of opinion, but as well-defined social interpretations and remedial programs concurrently held by large groups of organized workers, and that these same psychological groups have persisted for a considerable time and under a wide variety of circumstances. It must further appear from a life-history of concrete unions that the functional types in question are actually accounted for by those forces of selection and adaptation which the theory requires. That is to say, the test of the theory must be the pragmatic one of application. Professor Hoxie has reserved such proof to later chapters. But that he will be able, in the course of an initial volume, to establish his central thesis in any thoroughgoing way is scarcely to be expected. His task is nothing less than an exhaustive inquiry into the present and past of many particular unions—the ethnic and temperamental composition and cultural heritage of their memberships, the technical and entrepreneurial situations which have confronted them, and the politico-economic-social discipline to which they have been subjected. The materials for such a history have hardly been assembled, for the rich collections of documents already published have been made for a very different purpose and from a very different standpoint. Final verification will have to await the detailed studies of a lifetime, or of a school.

Nevertheless, there is sufficient warrant for the acceptance of Professor Hoxie's theory as a working hypothesis. It seems to accord with the known facts, it explains much in unionism that is unintelligible on any other view, and it is supported by the latest results of social psychology. Judicious inquirers have long perceived that a purely economic interpretation of history does not suffice to explain even economic institutions. It may well be that the extant material civilization exercises a selective surveillance over other elements of the cultural complex; it may even be granted that the exigencies of material life furnish the chief, if not the sole, stimulus to that process of adjustment whereby all growth and change of civilization are brought to pass.¹ Since, however, this process of growth is cumulative; since, therefore, the whole cultural situation at any given moment forms the starting-point for

¹ For a very able statement of this view see Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, chap. viii.

the next move, all institutions—juridical, aesthetic, and religious, as well as economic—become in their turn causes as well as effects. In the study of a particular social movement, such as labor unionism, the question is not how these institutions arose, but how they have affected, and been affected by, the movement concerned. The underlying forces, whether temperamental or institutional, may be taken as data, in the sense that they do not themselves require to be explained for the purpose in hand; but to abstract the economic from other influences in such a case is to study the motions of a puppet.

To sum up: Many have given a structural and narrative account of American labor unionism; Professor Hoxie's analysis is functional and genetic. Seen from the standpoint of aims, ideals, methods, and theories, there is no normal type to which all union variants approximate, no single labor movement which has progressively adapted itself to progressive change of circumstances, no one set of postulates which can be spoken of as *the* philosophy of unionism. Rather there are competing, relatively stable union types, functional and structural, the outcome of permanent differences in the temperament and situation of different groups of wage-workers.

If this pluralistic interpretation of the union movement meets general acceptance, it will have important consequences for social appraisal and action. It means that unionism cannot be judged and treated as a whole, that what is true of one type of union polity is not true of others, that, consequently, union history points no single moral to the publicist, and that no panacea, whether it be profit-sharing, "welfare work," industrial education, minimum wage, or social insurance, will meet the wishes or allay the discontent of all important groups of wage-workers. It means, further, that the errors and perversities of trade unions—as seen from the middle-class standpoint—are not to be corrected by much preaching. The several types of unionism are the outcome of positive conditions. Unionists are what they are by reason of congenital endowment and the circumstances under which they live and work. There is small likelihood, therefore, that union conviction and attitude will be much affected by any action which does

not change the ethnic character of the population nor alter the fundamental conditions of life and work.

To the professed student of social science the special significance of these papers will lie in their viewpoint and method of approach. Economics, and above all in the United States, has heretofore stood strangely outside the current of modern scientific development; its postulates are of a pre-evolutionary order, its method is highly abstract and a priori, its interest centers in classification quite after the fashion of Linnaean botany.¹ In Europe, though pre-Darwinism still holds the field, the evolutionary standpoint has been accepted by many economists of note,² but in this country the few exponents of genetic theory have been as voices crying in the wilderness. These papers will give comfort, therefore, to those whose hope it is that economics also may become an evolutionary science.

Like all genetic studies, this of trade unionism transcends the arbitrary limits of traditional economics. Professor Hoxie, in fact, has essayed an inquiry into group psychology. The inquiry is economic, not in the sense of isolating the economic life of the groups in question from the cultural situation in which that life is involved, but in virtue of the fact that the convictions, aims, and aspirations inquired into are such as converge upon the ways and means of livelihood. On the other hand, the study is none the less a contribution to social psychology because it has to do with economic groups. Indeed, it is only through such detailed studies of particular groups that a secure basis can be laid for general sociology. For the community is not aggregated of individuals merely; individuals are associated in all manner of groups, occupational, local, political, religious, and what not, each more or less selective in point of membership, each imposing more or less peculiar canons of conduct, each more or less differently affected by those exigencies which make for cultural growth and decay. Any useful analysis of social organization and functioning, therefore, must deal with these groups of which the larger society is composed.

¹ Cf. Veblen, "The Preconceptions of Economic Science," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XIII, 121, 396; XIV, 240; "The Limitations of Marginal Utility," *Journal of Political Economy*, XVII, 620.

² Gustav Schmoller, Werner Sombart, Tugan-Baranowsky, and Paul Vinogradoff will serve to illustrate the point.